



INTERVIEW WITH

*Lev Grossman*

## Introduction by *Cassandra Christopher*

I'm not an especially emotional being. But when I first read *The Magicians*, I was furious. I spent thirty minutes trying to explain my anger to my family and to my best friend. I felt that Lev Grossman had soiled Narnia, the most precious world I'd ever known, with a protagonist, Quentin, who was a self-absorbed ass. My advisor, who had recommended the series to me, suggested that perhaps it was an homage rather than a deconstruction, that Lev Grossman loved this world as much as I did and wanted to work with it in a wholly new way. At the time I couldn't have disagreed more because I, like Quentin, could not see past my own perspective.

But the reality of Quentin's world is so much more than his own selfishness and depression. When I say I'm not especially emotional, it's only to illustrate how powerfully consuming these books are, because once I got over my initial anger I couldn't put a stopper in my excitement and enjoyment. In *The Magicians* and its sequels Lev Grossman created a world rich with varied and nuanced characters, all of whom could have been people I've known. And these characters are the most special thing about *The Magicians*; they are real, and true, and they screw up their lives terribly. They learn, and move on, and grow up. In this series Lev Grossman has done what I think every writer sets out to do: to create an emotional reaction in their reader. I have felt raging anger towards these books, but I have also been consumed by love in a way that no other book series has accomplished. I have seen a terrifying reflection of myself in each of the main characters, and I have been completely won over despite my desperate attempts at detachment.

Lev Grossman has done other things, of course. He's written other novels, he's the book critic for *Time* magazine, and he was the first journalist to make a call on an iPhone. He even got to be a consultant and make a cameo appearance in the television adaptation of *The Magicians*. But for me, the most important thing he's done is this series. Magic doesn't come from dead languages and complicated hand motions. It comes from the ability to imagine the inner life of someone else. It comes from empathy.

**Cassandra Christopher:** *You leave a lot of unanswered questions in the first book, a lot of dangling threads and holes that were never filled. Did you ever intend to fill them? Or did you have something in your head that filled those holes?*

**Lev Grossman:** Somebody once said to me, “Writers love ambiguity and readers love closure.” Writers do this thing, and I’m really guilty of it, of leaving things dangling and unexplained and unresolved because, you know, that’s what life is like. Not everything gets wrapped up neatly, so why should I do that in my books? We sometimes forget that that’s why we like art so much, because it’s not exactly like life but it is, in fact, different. And yet, you don’t want everything to be too neat and tidy because then it would feel too . . . fake. So it’s true, I leave some things unresolved. I have a bad habit of leaving things unexplained. Sometimes I think it creates a nice atmospheric effect and sometimes it’s just annoying—I’m willing to admit that.

**CC:** *You’ve talked about how it was like an exercise in fanfiction, writing *The Magicians* in relation to *Narnia*. And I read your piece on fanfiction, which was almost a defense of fanfiction. So what I’m wondering now is how you feel about fanfiction of your own work?*

**LG:** Here’s the thing: I love it. It means so much to me that anybody would feel invested enough in these characters and this world to want to play with them in that way. I love it.

While I was working on the trilogy I was steering clear of fanfiction, as I think a lot of writers do, because we run into a problem which is that if somebody has a really good idea you find yourself feeling that that idea is now ruled out for you because you didn’t think of it, and you find yourself wondering, would I have thought of it if I hadn’t read this? It gets quite confusing—there have been lawsuits over it. So I steered clear of it. But now I look at it.

I haven't spent a lot of time reading it—I probably should. I sometimes check to see that it's there because it makes me feel good. I'll admit, I sometimes get annoyed when people make continuity mistakes, and it's a little bit like nails on a blackboard. But sometimes I'll read them—and people write the characters so well—Janet will be so funny, and Josh will be so funny, and Alice will be so eloquent, and you realize that you don't fully own these characters. When people read, they create their own Alice, based on the few words you put down. They extrapolate a whole person; they extrapolate their own Quentin; they do so much work to bring their stuff to life, and you really see that in fanfiction. It's great.

**CC:** *Quentin in the first book especially is kind of an anti-hero—he's never set up to be the hero and in the end [of the first book] he's not; Alice is. Did you set out to create an anti-Narnia or did it just happen?*

**LG:** It didn't just happen. One of the earliest things I thought about when I looked back at my very earliest notes was different ways to come at the Narnia question.

And in fact, I wrote the first draft of *The Magicians*, and they went to Narnia, so it used to be much more directly an engagement with Narnia. I don't think of it as an homage or a critique; maybe it's both, I don't know. I always wanted to talk back to C.S. Lewis. It was something that came to me from Phillip Pullman, actually; he's really engaging with Lewis too. And it was really reading his work and talking to him that kind of emboldened me to say that I could actually talk back to C.S. Lewis too if I wanted to.

**CC:** *Narnia is very much about venerating and respecting the reigning god, but your books are not as much. There's a lot of killing of gods, and at the end it's actually like the age of no god. I wondered whether there was an actual religious connection*

*with that or if it was just another step in the way that Fillory was supposed to be.*

**LG:** My engagement with the religious argument put forward by Narnia is limited because I grew up in a house from which religion was almost completely absent. The strong engagement with the god figures in my books partly comes from some unresolved feelings I probably have with my parents. It's a very Oedipal struggle. There are a lot of father figures in the books. Quentin struggles with Mayakovsky and Fogg and with his own father. It's not so much a religious argument as a way of reframing some personal struggles I had in my own life.

And then there is a level in which I do struggle with the problem of evil and suffering. If there is a god, why is there evil and suffering? I don't think anybody has ever resolved this. If there's a god who is omnipotent, why do people suffer and why are people allowed to do evil? We hardly ever see Narnia when things are peaceful; we tend to see it when things are going terribly wrong. I found myself wondering, why does Aslan allow that to happen?

So one of the great things about writing a world where the god is present and clopping around on four hooves meant that you could talk to him and say, look how terrible this world is. How could you do that? Having a god in the books allowed me to do that a little bit, which was satisfying.

**CC:** *Along the lines of craft, your characters are really distinct and developed and the reader gets a really solid sense of them right from the beginning, and I was wondering how you develop them, and if it starts with a baseline and then you build from there, or if it's like a jumble of character traits that turn into a person. How do you do that?*

**LG:** Really, it's all of that. Writing characters I find very,

very hard. What frequently ends up happening is that I'll introduce a character who is undifferentiated, and I'll march them around through the scenes and they'll start reacting and start talking, and they'll start having feelings inside them which I can describe, and slowly I'll begin to understand, and I'll have to go back and fill in the early bits where I didn't know who they were. But it's a really slow process.

The way that characters are made on the page is very weird because it is out of these little touches and little moments that really define the character for you. It's not as though you're saying, this person has this trait and this trait and this trait, it's honestly that you're constantly describing what's happening with them. It's really only just a few moments. It's like you're doing a portrait with just three or four lines, and then the reader has to make a face out of them. So those lines have to be very, very exact. And I spend a lot of time tinkering with them. If you go back and look at a novel and think, this character I really like, how do I know what they're like? You are only pointing to three or four or five moments that really define them.

**CC:** *With the actual casting of the magic, you've said that you wanted to know what it would feel like and know what they were doing and have a solid handle on the practice of magic. What kind of research did you have to do? There are so many different languages mentioned, different hand motions--*

**LG:** I didn't do any research.

**CC:** *None at all?*

**LG:** I mean, where would I look? I've read a lot of fantasy novels. I think everyone has a primal sense inside of them of how magic works, how magic ought to work. And, you know, reading fantasy, you mentally say, oh they got this bit right and this bit wrong, that's sort of it, that's not quite

right, that's completely wrong. And then finally you have a chance to say, this is how I always imagined it. And I imagined it that way as a child. It's not that much different than when I was eight years old running around summer camp acting out whatever Dungeons & Dragons we were doing.

A lot of it comes from *Dr. Strange*, which was one of my favorite comics growing up. A ton of it comes from D&D. I knew that I wanted magic to be difficult. I knew that I wanted the characters to have to work for it, I wanted it to be like an academic discipline. But it's one of those things you know, but you don't know how you know. But I really, I wanted to make the magic feel real and concrete. And a lot of that just came down to playing with it. It's not like King Arthur—there's so much research in King Arthur, oh my God.

**CC:** *So you are writing a novel on King Arthur. How related to The Once and Future King is it? In other interviews, you've said that TOAFK was a huge influence for you and at one point you mentioned that you wished you could have written it, but you couldn't because T.H. White had already written it, so you wrote The Magicians instead. Is your King Arthur novel going to be in that same vein or, how much from White is it pulling?*

**LG:** It's difficult about White. I mean, when I wrote *The Magicians* I felt like I could write against C.S. Lewis because I had a lot of problems with Lewis and a lot of things that I felt like I would have done differently. With White, there's not that much I would have done differently. I don't push back at White that much because he's so much a better writer than I am. And yet, there were certain aspects of the story that wouldn't leave me alone. I'm going to be writing about knights in their thirties, the ones who came up with Arthur who were thoroughly middle-aged. I was attracted to writing about characters who were closer to my age.

And you know, King Arthur is such a funny mixture of the real and the ideal. Those books are so much about how to be a perfect knight, trying to be a perfect Christian, conform to these ideals. And these knights try and try and try and they never do, except for Galahad, and what happens to Galahad? He immediately dies once he's perfected.

You know, this play of the real against the ideal is part of what drove *The Magicians* because we think of Narnia as this ideal and what if you play that ideal off against a very fallen version of it? There's that same tension in the Arthur stories, and I find it very exciting and very interesting. But you do have to find your own place in that tradition, and there are a lot of people in there already.



